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ABSTRACT

A high school library media specialist uses storytelling regularly in her oral presentations for students. For an audience of adolescents, stories need to be selected carefully and edited to keep the action moving. Music and character voices are effective in capturing and holding teenagers' attention. Storytelling is a tool for curriculum enhancement, and for promoting both the pleasure of reading and the use of the information center's resources. It develops listening and analytical skills, vocabulary, imagination, and a sense of story structure and language. Stories can give a human face to another culture, and they can cause teens to think about values. Sometime a story has a therapeutic effect on a class or an individual. Before teachers take their students to the information center, they collaborate with the staff to integrate information skills with curriculum activities. There are appropriate stories for language arts (myths/legends), social studies (multicultural folktales), science (environment), and math (problem solving). One idea is to begin a story club to nurture the pleasure of stories, both oral and written, among students. Students can also give informal book talks to each other about what they are reading. If the club begins with ninth graders, lifelong readers may be nurtured. In the 4-year high school period, an environment where reading and telling stories are natural can enrich the students' lives. (NKA)

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Never Too Old for Stories

(Tales of a High School Information Specialist)

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I WAS SITTING NEAR THE BACK CORNER of the high school gym, watching students arrive for the December holiday assembly. They filled up the single wall of bleacher seats and overflowed into standing-room-only spots along the sides and back wall. Post-lunch teenage energy bounced off the walls. The students did pep rally cheers. The undulation of a wave broke out here and there.

I began to panic. In thirty minutes it would be my turn to perform. Following a dynamic dance and drum duo, carols sung Whitney Houston style, and a holiday rap number, my job would be to get 500 high school students to listen to a Haitian folktale! Did I mention poor acoustics? I searched my repertoire for something else to do, but it was too late. "Just trust the story," I told myself. "They're not too old for stories."

The moment came. It took several minutes for the crowd to quiet down. Then I began telling *One, My Darling, Come to Mama*, the Cinderella-esque story of Philamandre, the rejected daughter who shows her mother a kindness she herself never knew. As I sang the story's refrain for the last time, there was total silence in the gym. Then applause.

When the assembly ended, a young man came across the gym floor. "Thank you for telling us that story." He shook my hand. In the hall students spotted me, smiled, and began singing the story's refrain: "Stay, Philamandre, stay where you are." Teachers reported that their students talked about the story and periodically would break into song. One young man said he liked the story, then paused and added quietly, "That's what my family is like." Yes, teenagers love stories too.

I use storytelling regularly as a high school information specialist (the evolving role of library media specialist). I select the stories carefully for the intended audience and edit them well to keep the action moving. Music and character voices are very effective in capturing and holding teenagers' attention. The Haitian folktale told in the gym was chosen because it had these two elements as well as a powerful storyline. I suspect that a key to the teenagers' acceptance of me as storyteller may be my willingness to be vulnerable in front of them, e.g., singing in a so-so voice or physically and vocally portraying an elephant. Once they are hooked on the pleasure of listening to stories, I can also tell great stories normally told to a younger audience by using an appropriate introduction, such as: "I love all the stories I tell, and *Wiley and the Hairy Man* is one of my special favorites. It's a story I would tell to your brothers and sisters and to your grandparents. It's a story for everyone."

Overtly, storytelling is a tool for curriculum enhancement, and for promoting both the pleasure of reading and the use of the Information Center's resources. Covertly, it develops listening and analytical skills, vocabulary, imagination, and a sense of story structure and language. Stories can give a human face to another culture, and they can cause teens to think about values. Some teachers have witnessed a story's therapeutic effect on a class or individual. Storytelling is also an important public relations tool: The students feel comfortable approaching "the storyteller" for assistance, and by extension they have a positive feeling toward the Information Center.

Before bringing their classes into the Information Center, teachers collaborate with our professional staff to integrate information skills instruction with their curriculum activities. In this manner, and through informal conversations, I know what is being taught and can suggest a storytelling enhancement to the curriculum. Here are some selected examples:

Language Arts

Myths and legends: *Phaeton, Ulysses, Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell.*

Story poems: *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, by Langston Hughes; *Sick, Hug o' War*, and *Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out*, by Shel Silverstein.

Social Studies

Multicultural folktales: *Tusi and the Great Beast* from ***Behind the Back of the Mountain***, retold by Verna Aardema (South Africa); *Mary Culhane and the Dead Man* in ***The Goblin's Giggle***, retold by Molly Bang (Ireland); *Tayzanne*, in ***The Magic Orange Tree and Other Haitian Folktales***, collected by Diane Wolkstein.

History storytelling: *Commodore Perry Comes to Japan*, by Carol Fifield.

Social issues: *Strength!* in ***Peace Tales***, by Margaret Read MacDonald.

Science

(Environment) Wetlands: *Wiley and the Hairy Man* in ***Twice Upon a Time***, by Judy Sierra and Robert Kaminski.

Biology: ***Tuesday***, by David Weisner (Caldecott Medal); ***Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices***, by Paul Fleischman (Newbery Medal).

Math

Problem solving: *The Cleverest Son, The Sticks of Truth, Dividing the Horses* in ***Stories to Solve***, retold by George Shannon.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

High School Orientation

Folktales for values: *One, My Darling, Come to Mama* in ***The Magic Orange Tree and Other Haitian Folktales***, collected by Diane Wolkstein; *Heaven and Hell* in ***Stories to Solve***, retold by George Shannon.

Storytelling techniques help me "talk the books off the shelf" in the casual one-on-one encounter with a student in need of an engaging story or in formal class booktalks (a brief and enticing "talk" about the book, usually with one or more excerpts). I also whet the teenagers' interests with picture books. Yes, picture books: ***Reflections*** by Ann Jonas; ***Heckedy Peg*** by Audrey Wood, illustrated by Don Wood; ***Ben's Trumpet***, by Rachel Isadora; ***The Boy Who Drew Cats***, told by Arthur A. Levine and illustrated by Frederic Clement; Jan Pienkowski's ***dinner time***; and anything by Chris Van Allsburg. These are a few of the books with illustrations that enhance students' imaginations through visual storytelling. They can also read them to younger brothers and sisters.

A colleague and I began a story club to nurture the pleasure of stories, both oral and written, among our students. We find that voluntary sharing of personal stories is a great way to bring the students into their own as storytellers. They also enjoy giving informal booktalks to each other about what they are reading. Most of the club's members are ninth graders, and we see them as lifelong readers in progress. We are excited about the potential impact that can be made over a four-year period in creating an environment where reading and telling stories are a natural part of their lives. The students can earn community service points through telling stories to the elderly or young children in the community, by taking photographs for a "Caught Reading" bulletin board, or by giving or videotaping a book commercial.

At a recent faculty meeting, I told the Chinese folktale about the difference between heaven and hell (working together to overcome problems versus everyone for him/herself). I wondered if this simple folktale would be able to hold the attention of tired teachers anxious to go home. As the story unfolded, side conversations and paper grading were suspended as listeners were caught up in the power of storytelling. The same thought that had come to me in the gym over a year before again crossed my mind: We're never too old for stories. SW

Carol Fifield is a storytelling activist at William H. Turner Technical Arts High School in Miami, Florida. Storytelling as high school curriculum enhancement is one of her major interests. Carol has presented at state and local conferences.

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